

The Eight Regiment Iowa Infantry and Its Colonel, James L. Geddes at Spanish Fort, Alabama

Sanford W. Huff

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

Recommended Citation

The Annals of Iowa, 5(4) (Oct. 1867): 947-953

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Yet we doubt not but that the operations of these club laws in some instances proved salutary, and that in those days under the circumstances, it became *apparently* necessary to make an occasional example in order to admonish and terrify others, but it opened a boundless field for abuse, established a dangerous precedent, and there is a contagion in precedents which few men have sufficient force of mind to resist; besides which, these organizations were wrong *malum in se*.

A few incidents such as the "Dahlonga war," the case of Abner Overman, and the murder of Dr. Wright, will fully illustrate the character and results of these "club laws."

(To be Continued.)

THE EIGHTH REGIMENT IOWA INFANTRY AND ITS COLONEL, JAMES L. GEDDES, AT SPANISH FORT, ALABAMA.

BY SANFORD W. HUFF, M. D.

April 8th, 1865, another signal victory over the Confederate forces was achieved in the capture of Spanish Fort, the stronghold of the approaches to the coveted military point, Mobile. The telegraph that day was eloquent with messages of the victory, and millions of hearts were gladdened by the news, regarding it as another not inconsiderable of the many heavy blows that were being dealt at the resources of the Confederate government, and another step toward its long hoped for surrender, and peace to the country.

A few days, and the newspapers teemed with the reports of army correspondents, descriptive of the splendid part performed by the different troops of the investing army—accounts as various as the correspondents were numerous; and by these accounts the bodies of troops engaged in the final, victorious charge were many, as many as the number of corps and division headquarters where correspondents were *kept*, and in whose interests they wrote. Hence it is perhaps known only to a few who were personally cognizant of the fact, that this victory is chiefly due to the intrepid conduct of

one regiment—an Iowa regiment—and to the planning of one subordinate commander—an Iowa officer. It is simple justice to that regiment and to that officer, and also essential to the “truth of history,” that the facts, the hitherto unwritten facts, of that transaction should be narrated.

It is no disparagement to the other Iowa regiments who made a part of General Canby’s army at the time of that famous night charge, that it was not their lot to have been participants, nor does it raise any question as to the probability of the final capture, and that within a brief time, of Mobile. For no conclusion of military logic was ever more clearly established than that the city and the forces it contained must, in due course of events, surrender. Nor, on the contrary, does it lessen the brilliancy of the achievement of the 8th Iowa and its Colonel, who commanded the brigade of which it formed a part, that the achievement was not one of absolute necessity for the victorious culmination of the campaign. But it shows conclusively the quality of the soldiers and officers of that regiment, and the dependence that could have been placed upon them had it so happened that the result of a campaign or the safety of an army, in any critical encounter, had depended upon their discipline and courage.

Colonel James L. Geddes, of the 8th Iowa infantry, commanded a brigade of General Carr’s Division, General A. J. Smith’s corps, to-wit: 3d brigade, 3d division, 16th army corps. In the line of investment of Spanish Fort, Col. Geddes’ brigade occupied the extreme right, lying upon the bay coast north of the Fort, the investing line extending semi-circularly from the coast south of the Fort to the coast north of it. This fortress was two and a half miles long by three-quarters of a mile wide, mounting 45 pieces of artillery. It was justly considered by the enemy the key to the city of Mobile, and the importance they placed upon its position in the defenses of the city, was forcibly shown by the superior engineering skill displayed in its construction, and the numerous and heavy ordnance with which it was defended. The formidable forts in the adjoining bay, viz: “Alexis,”

"Eugene" and "Hugo," were entirely dependent upon it for their effectiveness, and were consequently involved in its fall, and from the same cause the city of Mobile became an easy prey.

The investing position of the 16th corps was gained after a sharp encounter with the enemy, on the 27th of March, who moved upon the Fort in splendid style, and with the characteristic vigor of that veteran force and its commander. It was said, at the time, in army circles, that it was the judgment of Gen. Smith to have pushed on to the storming of the works without a halt, and that the feasibility of the movement was sustained by subsequent developments, and the probable loss would not have equalled the aggregate loss of the twelve days of siege which succeeded. But Gen. Canby was a man of great prudence, and not disposed to take risks in a case where he believed the result could be made certain by biding his time. It is probable, furthermore, that not having been personally cognizant of the capabilities of the veteran troops which formed his army—with whom he had not before personally served, but whose experience in similar charges had been numerous, a large portion of whom were just now fresh from the grandest infantry charge of the war, at Nashville—that he did not properly estimate their prowess in such a movement. And on the other hand, it is probable that General Smith's judgment—knowing, as he did, so thoroughly the quality of these troops, having witnessed, as he so frequently had, their achievements under his own direction—was a clear and practical conclusion, from unmistakable data, of their capability, and that the risk of failure was of a very remote and contingent character. But, be this as it may, it is not important to our purpose, and we turn to the further actual incidents of the siege and capture.

Twelve days of exposure and labor, unequalled during the war except, perhaps, at the siege of Vicksburg, was the lot of the investing army. The formidable gunboats of the enemy in the bay kept up a continuous and destructive fire on the right of our line, raking the entire length of the 3d division

of the 16th corps with their hundred pound shells. There was no way of evading them, for the boats were constantly shifting their position, hurling them successively into flank, then the rear, and then they would come obliquely, crashing through the line of pits in front, covering a company of men at a time with the debris of destroyed works. This destructive work continued until the 6th of April, when the General commanding found it absolutely necessary, in order to prevent the evacuation of the position, to plant batteries of one and two hundred pound Parrotts further up the bay to play upon them, which had the desired effect of disabling some, and finally of driving them all away.

The loss to the investing army during the siege averaged not less than one hundred men daily.

On the eleventh day of the siege, General Canby, who had changed his original plan of operations, was arranging to make his first blow fall upon Blakely, a strongly fortified position four miles distant, and for that purpose orders had been given to withdraw a part of the forces from before Spanish Fort, and concentrating with General Steele, already there, force the surrender of that point preliminary to pushing farther advances upon the fortress. Among the troops to have been withdrawn was the division of General Carr, which would have moved on the 9th had not the Fort fallen on the night of the 8th of April.

Prior to the reception of the order to withdraw, Colonel Geddes had frequently pointed out to his division commander what he considered the most vulnerable point of the enemy's position in his front, and expressed his belief in being able to carry a portion of his works, but had never received permission to make the attempt. On receiving "marching orders" to Blakely, General Carr immediately determined to permit the attack which had previously been suggested to him, and riding down to the quarters of Col. Geddes on the evening of the 8th of April, about 5 o'clock, asked the Colonel if he still thought that he could make a lodgement on the rebel works. Being answered in the affirmative, he then informed the

Colonel that a general cannonade would be opened upon the rebel lines within an hour, and desired him to attack during the time of the artillery practice. Promptly, within the brief space of half an hour, the Colonel planned and made arrangements for the assault.

Immediately instructing Lt. Col. Bell, commanding the 8th Iowa infantry, to furnish the forlorn hope and lead the attack, he formed his regiment for that purpose behind a gabion approach which had been projected from his right flank some time previous. The regimental commander was ordered to commence the attack at a given time, supporting the movement of his advance with the rest of his command. The 81st, 108th and 124th Illinois regiments of infantry were ordered to man their advance pits, and at the proper time to open a continuous fire on the enemy's works, directed just over the crest of their defenses. This terrific fire had the effect of diverting their attention from the operation of the 8th Iowa on their left, and preventing them from forming outside their trenches in sufficient numbers to resist that regiment, which had now carried the extreme left of their works, and was advancing steadily and successfully along their defenses, capturing hundreds of the rebels on their victorious march, keeping just behind the line of fire of the other three regiments in the trenches, who obliqued their fire as they advanced. For the purpose of defending, at all hazards, the lodgment made, the Colonel now formed his entire brigade within the Fort, and advancing his line through the interior of the rebel works, with his left resting on his defenses, drove the enemy from over 800 yards of his works, capturing 6 pieces of artillery, 3 battle-flags, and 600 prisoners of war. Wishing still to advance, he was deterred from doing so at the time by the surprising fact that the investing army knew nothing of the assault up to this time, and were still dropping their shells in dangerous proximity to his little force, and a further advance would have exposed him to the full effect of the severe fire of the artillery coming from our own lines, together with the fact that he was in the midst of the rebel stronghold, detached

from the army and cut off from immediate support in case of need.

Halting, therefore, at this point, he repaired to headquarters for orders, leaving the brigade temporarily in the command of the next senior officer, Col. Turner of the 108th Ills.

His orders were—after the surprise and gratification of his success had been expressed—to entrench and hold the position until morning, when, he was informed, the place would be taken by direct assault.

On returning to his command within the rebel works, he sent forward a strong skirmish line for the purpose of finding out the enemy's position and movements. It was about midnight when the report came back from the skirmish line that the enemy were retreating and had been so engaged for some time.

Without a moment's delay, or waiting for orders, the Colonel pushed his command to the enemy's landing on the bay, capturing a number of prisoners, 45 pieces of artillery, a large quantity of commissariat stores, small arms and ammunition, but the bulk of the garrison had succeeded in making their escape to Mobile and Blakely.

At early dawn on the morning of the 9th of April, a large proportion of 35,000 men—the writer among the number—looking out from their places in the trenches and behind the various "works" that environed the formidable fort of the day before, saw with surprise and joy, the flag of the Republic floating from its battlements, and learned for the first time that a night attack had been made by some portion of the army, and that the strong hold was captured.

Few, however, learned all the facts. Amid the reports and counter reports—amid the stir and preoccupation of mind relative to the next movement, (for the next day Blakely was taken by direct assault,) it is probable that not one in a hundred of that many miles of *line* who sent up the shout of exultation, and from whose full hearts welled unexpressed thanksgivings that the long dreaded danger of assault and its consequent slaughter was passed, learned then, or have

yet learned the particulars of the capture, or to whom was due the credit of the achievement.

To Colonel Geddes, as we have seen, is due the instigation of the attack. To his planning and direction and to his brigade, and prominently of it, to the bravery and discipline of the 8th Iowa, is due the lodgment made upon the enemys' walls; and from this bold and successful movement resulted the evacuation of this place by the enemy, and the capture of six hundred and fifty prisoners and the aforementioned ordinance and stores. The 8th Iowa alone capturing five hundred of the prisoners.

Not a regiment outside of his brigade fired a gun in the victorious movement; not a division commander, except Gen. Carr, not a corps commander, nor Canby the commanding general, knew of the assault until after the lodgment had been effected and a staff officer of the colonel was sent back to convey notice of its success.

MINOR INCIDENTS OF THE WAR---No. 1.

At the battle of Mission Ridge the 10th Iowa did excellent service. There were few steadier regiments under fire than this. The sharpest encounters at the West—Iuka, Corinth, Champion Hills and Mission Ridge, were its schools of discipline. To its line officers it owed much for its uniform steadiness in trying positions. Brave, cool and true men were they all.

The following incident will illustrate the character of one of them, and show the reason why one of its companies never failed when needed.

Captain Solomon Sheph^{er}d, a grey-bearded elderly man of nearly sixty years, commanded Co. D of this regiment. The Captain had been "in" with his boys through all their hardest battles and held them firm by his command and example through several tempests of grape and minnie, but, for several weeks before the battle of Chattenoga had been pros-

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.